

THOMAS FIELDING SCOTT: FAILURE OR FOUNDATION?

by Lawrence N. Crumb

The Episcopal Church's first bishop in the Pacific Northwest was Thomas Fielding Scott. He served for only thirteen years (1854-1867) and left thinking he had been a failure. But was he?

Scott was born 12 March 1807 in Iredell County, North Carolina, the younger of two brothers. He became an active member of the Presbyterian Church at age seventeen and went on to Franklin College, as the University of Georgia was then known. He graduated in 1829 and was licensed to preach in the Presbyterian Church. He served several churches in Georgia and Tennessee until 1842, when he met Bishops James Hervey Otey of Tennessee and Leonidas Polk, Missionary Bishop of the Southwest (later, of Louisiana). They were both converts to the Episcopal Church, and under their influence he came to decide that the claims of episcopacy were true. (He had been unhappy with the Presbyterian Church because of a split in 1837-38.) He was ordained deacon in 1843 and priest in 1844 by Bishop Stephen Elliott of Georgia, serving churches in Marietta and Columbus. He later described himself as "conservative and catholic," possibly the influence of Bishop Otey, whose "high and dry" churchmanship was widespread in the early Nineteenth Century.

The General Convention of 1853 established the Missionary jurisdiction of the Oregon and Washington Territories, and Scott was elected as its first bishop. Unlike William Ingraham Kip, who was elected at the same time for California and consecrated at the convention with several bishops taking part, Scott was consecrated at Christ Church, Savannah, on 8 January 1854, with only three bishops (Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina) participating. Scott's jurisdiction consisted of what is now Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and parts of Montana and Wyoming; like

Jackson Kemper in 1835, he was “the bishop of all outdoors.” Unlike Kemper, however, he had but small success in recruiting clergy from the East, and no success in having his territory divided. (Idaho was separated in 1867 and joined with Montana and Utah, but it was just as Scott was leaving.)

Scott traveled to Oregon with his wife, Eveline, by way of the Isthmus of Panama, but without the train across that was later installed and used by his successor in 1869; they arrived in Portland on 22 April 1854. He must have cut an imposing figure, over six feet tall and weighing 250 pounds. Hale and hearty at forty-six, he needed his strength for the long journeys by stagecoach over rough roads; on one occasion, he was thrown out when the coach overturned. He also travelled by horseback and canoe, when necessary; eventually, he was able to make the longer trips by river steamer. Thomas E. Jessett, writing a century later, described the trips to Boise as being “over roads and in vehicles unsurpassed for roughness and torture.”

There were only two priests in the area when Scott arrived: the Rev. John McCartney, an army chaplain at Fort Vancouver in Washington, who also served Trinity Church, Portland; and the Rev. Michael Fackler, then living in Oregon City. They were joined in 1855 by Johnston McCormack, a deacon (ordained priest 1857) and in 1856 by the Sellwood brothers: John, a priest, and James, a deacon (ordained priest in 1860). A visit to New York in 1859 gave an opportunity to recruit at the General Theological Seminary, where four responded. One estimate of lay communicants in 1854 put the number at twenty, mostly in Portland. His first confirmation, on 20 July 1854, happened to be a woman whose husband, James Birnie, had been confirmed in Scotland by Bishop John Skinner, one of the consecrators of Samuel Seabury of Connecticut in 1784. By 1859, there were 79 communicants in eight places.

Mrs. Birnie (née Charlotte Beaulieu) was from Canada and is described as “part Indian.” There were many of that community “from near and far” who attended two Birnie weddings on successive days, described as making a colorful contrast to the bishop’s black and white vestments. Although Scott arrived “prepared to face the horrors of Indian disturbances” – the Whitman massacre had taken place at Walla Walla in 1847 – he does not seem to have interacted directly with Native Americans. In 1860, there was sufficient tension in the Vancouver area that the militia was put on alert, but Scott’s involvement would have been only whatever advice he may have given to the local priest. By contrast, the Rev. Mr. Willis is recorded as having organized a class for Native American boys in his Sunday School at the church in Olympia. They ranged in age from ten to sixteen years and were “excellent pupils and seem to have taken part in all the regular activities including the Christmas party.”

The Civil War took its toll, both personally and financially, on the church in Oregon. The bishop had friends who were fellow-southerners and in favor of slavery, although the practice was outlawed in the territory. He was able to preserve peace within the church, partly because the national church had not taken an official position on the issue. He referred to the war only once in his addresses to Convocation (as the convention of a missionary district was called), and that was in 1861, at the very beginning of the conflict. He said,

We have confined ourselves strictly to our mission as a Church, leaving all political and social disputes where they properly belong – to the State, and to the progress of Christian civilization. Let us ever cherish a spirit of charity, of considered thoughtfulness of each other’s views and feelings ... let us never import the disputes of others to mar our harmony.

One of the clergy had been supported by the diocese of South Carolina, and this aid ceased completely, while aid from the North was diminished. Moreover, the Idaho gold rush of 1861 caused a decrease in population west of the Cascades. In 1862, Scott submitted his resignation,

but the House of Bishops asked him to take a leave of absence instead. In May 1867 he announced his intention to request a transfer to the East Coast, citing his wife's health. Thomas E. Jessett, the Episcopal Church's premier historian of the Pacific Northwest, describes Scott as

Deeply disappointed by the failure of the General Convention of 1865 . . . to provide him with episcopal relief, tired of the continual isolation from his episcopal colleagues now almost eight years long, worn out with the hardships of travel, and despairing of being able to meet the demands of his office in view of the constantly expanding population in his vast jurisdiction.

In 1867, Scott journeyed to New York with the intention of resigning, feeling that he had been a complete failure. Contracting a fever on shipboard, he died on 14 July, shortly after arriving in New York, where he was buried in the newer churchyard of Trinity Church at Broadway and Riverside Drive.

Little is known of Mrs. Scott. She was born Eveline Jane Appleby 7 December 1812 in Gainesville, Georgia. Her father was originally from Pennsylvania, and her mother, from South Carolina. They married in Gainesville in 1805, and Eveline was the third of six children. She married Scott on 25 November 1830 in Gainesville, when he was a year out of college and just beginning his ministry in the Presbyterian Church. They had three daughters: Jane, born in 1835; Lora, in 1837; and Sarah, in 1844 (adopted in 1848). They disappear from public records after the census of 1850 and may have succumbed to the yellow fever epidemic that struck Georgia shortly after. That would explain why the Scotts were willing to relocate to the other side of the country. They are conspicuously absent from Scott's will, written in 1867, since it mentions nieces and nephews. We do not know how Eveline felt about moving to Oregon. She would have been grieving for her daughters, but she was willing to start a new chapter in a place where familiar things would not constantly remind her of them. For several years, she administered Spencer Hall for Girls in Milwaukie, a church-related institution, and thus shared in her

husband's ministry to that extent. In 1867, when Scott requested a transfer to the East Coast, he said it was necessary for his wife's health. He died later that year, and Eveline returned to Georgia, where she died in Jackson on 12 July 1893. She wrote a biographical sketch of her husband that was used by the author of Scott's entry in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, but it has been missing since at least 1947.

Despite Scott's feeling of failure, there were many successes, all the more remarkable because of the difficult conditions. These are described in their manifold nature in Scott's entry in the *Dictionary of American Biography*:

The district placed in his charge was extensive, conditions of travel were painfully arduous, means of communication were inconstant, money was scarce, and competent assistants almost impossible to secure.

During his time in office, the number of communicants increased from about fifty to over two hundred; of clergy, from two to ten (eight in Oregon); of church buildings, from one unfinished to thirteen completed (nine in Oregon), two built at the bishop's expense. Three churches (Trinity and St. Stephen's, Portland; St. Paul's, Salem) had become self-supporting. Two diocesan schools, in Oswego [later merged into Lake Oswego] and Milwaukie, were opened, although they had to be closed in 1866 for financial reasons; a parish school in Astoria remained open until 1878. A diocesan paper, *The Oregon Churchman*, was begun in 1861 but ceased two years later, again for financial reasons. (It was revived in 1869; after several changes of title, it became *The Oregon Episcopal Church News* in 1989.) He left more than his vestments to his successor: he had laid a foundation upon which another would build.

Sources: *Living Church Annual*, 1925:129; *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1928-58), 16:501-02; *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill and London, 1994), 5: 305-06; Thomas E. Jessett, "Bishop Scott and the Episcopal Church in Washington," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 38 (1947): 3-17; Jessett, "Thomas Fielding Scott: Bishop of Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 55 (1954): 45-72; Jessett, "The Episcopate of Thomas Fielding

Scott: First Missionary Bishop of Oregon and Washington, 1854-1867,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 23 (1954): 10-53; Scott’s will, dated 6 June 1867 (copy in Washington State University Library); Ancestry.com, consulted 6 November 2020, for census and family records. Scott’s episcopal vestments had been given to him by the widow of Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright, Provisional Bishop of New York, who was consecrated in 1852 and died in 1854, the same year that Scott arrived in the Northwest.